Letters *in the* SAND

A story of Murder and Gold in Africa

By H. Bedford-Jones

I

A WHITE man lay dead, twisted and contorted on the sand, showing he had died slowly. A bullet had ripped through him from back to breast; with morning the bloody sand had become black with clustered flies, and birds hovered. The sand was firm, salty, baked by the African sun, dampened by the Mediterranean three hundred feet distant.

Around him, as he lay dying, the man had traced letters in the sand, and died in tracing the eighth; his finger was still in its curve, and his outflung arm showed tattooing. Faint marks showed near the letters, as though words had followed them, but if any words were there the wind had effaced them. The eight letters remained, large, deeply ploughed—H T W S S T K S. These things happened on the lonely shore, three miles beyond the village of Temba, with Tripoli a dim blur in the west.

It was a week later, when Widson landed and went to the American Consulate. When he stepped into the office, the consul took one look at him, then bounced up.

"Widson! By all the gods, how are you?"

"Hello, Hank!" The bronzed first officer stepped forward and gripped the fist outthrust at him. "Heard you were here, and took the chance. Out of the service for good, eh?"

The consul looked at his empty left sleeve, and shrugged. "Sure. You're in the merchant?"

"Uh-huh." This brief reference to war years and naval service done, Widson took a cigaret, sat on the desk-corner, and eyed the consul. "First officer, *Bertha J.* We rammed one of your blasted Greek spongers the other night and went down—"

"What? You were on that craft?" exclaimed the consul. "Why, I thought the crew was taken to Malta?"

"They were," said Widson. "But a sponger offered me a lift here, so I took it. I can get a berth anytime, and need a vacation, and thought I'd see you. Can you stand me for a week?"

"You're durned shouting! Got a grip—no, being shipwrecked, you wouldn't. All right, I—"

Widson laughed. "Forget it. I have money, and my duffle-bag."

"Well, I've a spare room for you, and anything you need. Take you right up

now. We'll lunch in ten minutes, so let's go—what's the matter?"

Widson's gaze had fallen on a bit of paper on the desk. He turned it about and eyed it.

"What's this?"

"Puzzle—got the whole coast by the ears." The consul laughed. "Come along—tell you about it over luncheon."

TWENTY minutes afterward, over the table in the patio, the consul told his guest about the man who had been found dead in the sand down the coast. When it came to explaining the paper Widson had taken from his desk, he seemed rather embarrassed.

"To tell you the truth, Widson, I was trying to figure out those letters—"

"Mean to say you don't know what they mean?" demanded Widson.

"Nobody knows." The consul waved his hand. "I've learned the man was an American named Harden—a sort of drifter. Had a U. S. flag tattooed on his arm, so I buried him. He was down here looking for the *Kerguelec* treasure, I fancy. That's why all the fuss about him."

"Spill it," commanded Widson briefly. "Treasure? My nose itches, feller. How come?"

"Your nose isn't the only one," and the consul grinned. "The *Kerguelec* was torpedoed during the war—Frog boat with a lot of bullion aboard. Recently one or two articles have been picked up along the coast, relics of her. It's thought she may have been carried by currents in among some of the shoals and islands, in which case she'd be easy picking for somebody. In fact, a chap named Erdstrom has been here a month, looking about quietly—calls himself a Swede, but may be anything. I think he's a Frenchman, myself. Told me the other day he'd like to get hold of a white man who'd be reliable, to look about with him. He'd not dare trust a single black, or an Italian either. I think he's figured something from these letters, same as I have."

Widson smiled a little. "What have you figured?" he asked.

"That Harden found the wreck, was shot in the back, and left a message. I can't take it up, of course—my position and all that. If you'd like to spend your lay-off on it—"

"I'm on, by all that's holy!" exclaimed Widson eagerly. "What d'you figure this to mean, then? We'll split on the proceeds, feller—if you save my hide and gold from the wops and get me away."

"First find your gold. Give me that paper." The consul seized the paper, got out a pencil, and leaned over the table. "Nothing could be made out except these initials, savvy? I imagine they're the initials of words."

"Sure they are," began Widson, then laughed and checked himself. "I've figured out for myself what the words might be—but go ahead."

"Well, the letter K certainly stands for *Kerguelec*," said the consul seriously. "Call the last word 'safe'—that makes '*Kerguelec* safe,' a most important point. Nothing is known about Harden, but the tattooing shows he served in some navy if not ours, so we should adopt proper terms for the directions."

Widson said nothing, listening with an amused twinkle in his eyes. The consul jotted down the message as he had conceived it, and produced this result:

Hold Tomba West by South. Sand thick. *Kerguelec* safe.

"Can't help you much, I'm afraid—one guess is as good as another," he said, tossing the paper across the table. "But help yourself. What would you make of it?"

"Something a lot different," said Widson. "Got a chart of the coast?"

"Yes. Come in the office."

THEY adjourned to the cool office, started the electric fan buzzing, and the consul laid out a large-scale chart of Tripoli and the adjacent coast. The spot where Harden had died was desolate enough, inside the usual shoals and half-submerged islets. After a good deal of figuring, while the consul hammered a typewriter, Widson rolled up the chart.

"Looks as though you had hit the message as near as we could tell," he said. "I don't see that I can do any better—"

The kavass, a huge black Sudanese, entered and saluted with word that Mr. Erdstrom was outside. The consul looked at Widson, who nodded. A moment later, Erdstrom entered the room and the consul introduced Widson. The two shook hands appraisingly.

Erdstrom saw a bronzed, alert-eyed,

smiling seaman. Widson saw a rather tall, thin man, brow oddly white from much wearing of a sun-helmet, dark and deep-set eyes, mouth rather weak but cruel enough to pass for strength. French? Perhaps; it was hard to say. The consul told who Widson was, and spoke of old acquaintance in the navy.

"I've spoken of him to you," he continued, "and he might throw in with you while he's here, if he'd suit."

"Anyone you'd recommend would suit," said Erdstrom in perfect English. A queer smile touched his eyes, but not his lips, as he regarded Widson. "You understand that I am hunting for this wreck alone, without a single servant?"

"I understand the circumstances," said Widson.

"I can offer you a partnership," said Erdstrom thoughtfully. "If we find the place, there is work to be done; we cannot trust a soul hereabouts. Greek spongers, blacks, Italians — all are to be shunned. We must go to a place I have in mind, and camp—we'll go by boat. I am leaving at nine tonight. I should be glad to have you as companion, if you wish to go."

"Good!" exclaimed Widson, and extended his hand. "Will you call here for me?"

"Agreed," said Erdstrom. He shook hands, and forthwith departed.

When they were alone again, Widson looked at the consul, a slight hardening perceptible in his steely gaze.

"That's Harden's murderer."

"Eh?" The consul started, eyes widening. "Look here, don't go off half-cocked—"

"I'm not," said Widson.

"You are. Erdstrom's been trying to figure out the meaning of that message with me half a dozen times. He had met Harden and liked him. For the past week he's been getting supplies and the right boat—a motor craft—"

"Bosh," said Widson. "He knows what those letters meant. He got the dope from Harden and then murdered him. I'm going into this and I'm going to get Erdstrom's hide."

"But why?" exclaimed the consul. "What's this beggar Harden to you?"

"Nothing—never heard of him before. Just the same, wait and see."

"Better get yourself a sun-helmet," said the consul, but Widson only smiled.

II

THE level rays of early morning sunlight beat across water and sand—just the two things. Creamy hummocks rose along the shore, hiding everything inland; sand-spits and islets cut off the coast-line; outside, the blue Mediterranean stretched illimitably.

A boat poked along a channel among the islets, touched the shoals, churned her way across, and at length came to rest on the shore of the largest sand-strip, where the yellow sands were heaped high and irregularly. The two men in her, clad in white shorts, shirts, boots and topees, climbed out and pulled her nose up.

All night Widson had scarcely spoken, asking no questions, holding the boat as directed by Erdstrom. He stretched himself and yawned.

"This the place?"

"Yes. Let's have a bite to eat and a talk, sleep until afternoon, then go to work."

"Right."

Their camp was quickly made—a brown tent on the seaward side to get the breeze. A solidified alcohol stove and their supplies were produced; in half an hour they had prepared a meal, and when cheroots were lighted, Erdstrom spoke.

"I suppose you know about the clue left by Harden?"

"The initials? Yes. You knew him?"

"Not at all," said Erdstrom, looking out at the sea. "But the initials showed me all. I had figured the approximate position, and it only remains to see if I fitted the right words to those letters."

Widson carelessly produced and handed over the paper given him by the consul.

"Anything like this?"

Erdstrom looked at it, and laughed. "Not bad for a guess. The man Harden was found near Temba, that village along the coast west of here. The bits of identified wreckage showed up near Temba, and the currents are charted. I figure the *Kerguelec* was broken in two, and the two final letters mean '*Kerguelec's* stern'. Eh?"

"They might also mean King Solomon," said Widson, and Erdstrom met his merry blue eyes with a short laugh.

"Or anything else. Well, here's what I've figured out—we may sleep on it." Erdstrom leaned over and traced the eight letters in the sand.

"A dying man," he pursued, "trying to leave a message, would not bother with unimportant words. We may assume that he tried to leave the essentials of his message alone, as one writes in a telegram. Two names are fairly certain, Temba and *Kerguelec*. Working from that premise, I make this message."

His finger spelled it out in the sand:

Holding Temba West, Safra South. Try for the *Kerguelec's* Stern.

"Huh?" Widson frowned. "What's Safra?"

"An oasis due south of here—Temba's due west." Erdstrom chuckled, delighted by his own ingenuity. "The lines come together, by the chart, at the north shore of this islet. I must take bearings, of course, and verify it. We'll work out the thing today and then see what luck we have late this afternoon. What d'you think of my reading the riddle?"

"You seem to have read it," said Widson with a nod. "Was that all you had to go on?"

The other man's dark eyes flickered to him sharply, swiftly, but Widson was looking out to sea.

"Of course," said Erdstrom. "With my own previous deductions."

"Well," and Widson yawned, "I'm due for a siesta. Need me to take any noon sights?"

"No, I can handle it."

WIDSON crawled under the tent-shelter and threw off helmet and boots. He did not go to sleep at once, however, despite his seeming; he was thinking about that sharp glance from Erdstrom, at his question. Erdstrom had not deduced the gist of that message by a long shot!

"What happened," said Widson to himself, "was about like this. They were working together, and Harden had something definite to go on. Erdstrom wanted the information, got it, and then shot him in the back. To the casual eye, it would seem that Harden left that writing, as he died, to broadcast what he knew and cheat Erdstrom. The large initial letters remained, the rest was effaced. Knowing the secret, Erdstrom could of course set in more or less correct words to the gaps. Well, we'll see later! I've no shadow of evidence—but I'll know I'm right if Erdstrom does go straight to the wreck. That means he discovered Harden's secret and murdered him."

It was long past noon when Widson wakened, to find the other man asleep at his side in the tent's shade. He crawled out and dressed.

The afternoon was declining, and they had not eaten since morning. Widson set to work with the canned heat, knocked up a meal, and called Erdstrom. He had not missed evidences that the latter had been busy during the heat of the day; sextant and compass were in sight, the sand was much trampled, and tracks showed that Erdstrom had crossed the hummocks more than once to the seaward shore of the islet.

"Anything in sight?" asked Erdstrom as he emerged.

"All clear," said Widson. "Come and get it! Ready for work?"

"Ready and eager," returned the other, and joined him in five minutes.

Erdstrom was eager enough, as his manner showed, for beneath his nonchalant air Widson was watching him keenly. The man was excited, anxious to be at the job; obviously, his work had borne results. Presently he unbosomed himself, speaking jerkily.

"Put a stick in the sand, over at the shore—saw it, did you? That marks the spot—the lines cross. Somewhere just off there, we should find the wreck, or part of it. That small islet to the westward makes a channel for the currents."

"All right." Widson stuffed his pipe with befitting care, lighted it, found it drawing well. "Say the word, and we're off. Nothing in sight to seaward. You don't think anyone's watching us?"

Erdstrom smiled, in his rather unhandsome fashion.

"Not much, after the course we took last night getting here! Anyone who could have traced us, would be a wizard. I'm ready—let's be off."

They adjourned to the boat, shoved her out, removed the tarpaulins, started her, heading from the inner channel to the seaward side. Neither man was talkative. If there was not actual dislike between them, there was a suspension of amenities; Erdstrom was nervous, mental, swift to sense unspoken things, and probably divined something odd in Widson's attitude.

Widson reflected that he knew nothing of his companion, beyond what the consul had said. They had not exchanged reminiscences, confidences, hints of previous years; it was as though a blanket hid all the past. More than once, Widson thought of the man lying dead in the sand, a bullet through his back, and the recollection held him alert.

They rounded out into the channel, and reached for the seaward side of the island, where a bit of driftwood showed erect in the sand. No sail marred the horizon. Erdstrom broke out a pair of lashed oars and got them ready, and Widson shut off the engine. Erdstrom laughed.

"It is something to have a man like you, my friend—no orders needed! We work together well. Yes, we'll have to seek along the channel and see what we can find."

Widson nodded and fitted his oar.

THEY cruised up and down, slowly, off the seaward shore, searching the clear waters below them, now and again Widson taking a sounding. The surprising depths of the channel here, which varied from two to forty fathom, showed how the currents scoured through. So far as the treasure was concerned, Widson figured it was all a wild-goose chase—yet there was always the chance.

"Even if we found her," he broke into speech, "the big job would be to locate where the gold lay. We'd have to blow her to pieces, and that'd mean everything down in the sand."

Erdstrom looked at him and grinned.

"The bullion? It is in an old wall safe in the captain's cabin."

"How d'you know that?"

Erdstrom shrugged. "I know. And the officer's cabins are not under the bridge, but aft. She was an old ship, you know. I can find my way about her."

"Huh!" said Widson. "You must have known her pretty well."

"I did," said Erdstrom, and then was silent. The curt words, and the look that came with them, served as warning.

Widson was no fool, and had the whole thing clear before him now. The man was French, all right, and knew the *Kerguelec*—knew everything about her. Probably he had been an officer aboard her when she was sunk, otherwise he would not have known where the gold was stowed.

"Sly old fox!" he thought to himself. "Kept quiet all these years, laid low, waited for his time, and now he's out to reap his reward! Well, there's only one way to get a confession out of him—that's to wait for the right moment, take him clear off guard, and surprise it from him. And if I don't pick the right minute, then good night."

They continued their steady and monotonous labor, hour after hour, without result. When the sun was at the western rim of land and sea, Erdstrom threw in his oar wearily and was about to order the return, when he checked himself abruptly and leaned over the rail, staring down. Widson joined him.

"See it?" demanded Erdstrom hoarsely. "Or is it a shadow—"

"Looks like it," returned Widson. "Can't tell now—it'll be dark in ten minutes. Get our bearings—wait, float an oar here to mark the spot!"

Whether that huge and shadowy bulk could be their quarry was impossible to say in the rapidly failing light. Sounding, Widson got a bare nine fathom. He used the line to make fast an oar, then stood up and looked at his companion. Erdstrom's eyes were blazing.

"Go back?"

Erdstrom nodded and relaxed.

The uncertainty of it was maddening, at least for Erdstrom; forced to wait until morning to verify the discovery, his rather volatile nature could not contain itself. Widson prodded him that night, deftly yet accurately, by scoffing at the possibility of having found the wreck so quickly.

"It couldn't be done," he affirmed. "Such a thing requires days, weeks, often months! We have struck on something else. To go rowing about for a few hours and pitch on it, would be a rank impossibility."

"No, no!" declared Erdstrom seriously. "What you say is true, and yet it is such things which do happen, my friend! It's all in the stroke of luck. And I deciphered Harden's message correctly, I think."

Widson wondered just what information he had pumped out of Harden before murdering him. Enough, certainly, to set words to the initials that Harden had left in the sand. Enough to find the wreck after a few hours' search, possibly—who could tell? Or perhaps it was the other way around. Perhaps Harden had done the pumping, and had learned too much.

The only important thing, so far as Widson was concerned, was that Harden had been shot from behind—rank murder, that!

Probably Erdstrom had said "my friend" to Harden, too, in that same oily tone of voice. Well, no matter. Widson patted the pistol under his armpit, and fell asleep.

Morning came. They were up before the dawn, both of them, and getting a bite to eat ere the sun rose. When the red disk of it loomed above the waters to the east, they were out in the boat, waiting near the floating oar. And when the level rays began to shoot down and pierce the watery depths, there was no need of looking farther.

The shattered after portion of the *Kerguelec* lay below them.

III

"WHO'S to go?" said Widson, puffing his pipe alight.

"I must go, of course, since I know just where to look."

So the man would trust him, then! Widson laughed to himself at that. No reason not to trust, of course, until the gold was brought up; just the same, it would be easy, and poetic justice, to leave Erdstrom down there. However, that couldn't be done without evidence, and the moment for confession was still far from here. It would come only with ultimate success or ultimate failure—and must be awaited.

They unlashed the tarpaulin, forward of the engine, and laid bare the diving equipment Erdstrom had rented from some Greek sponger. Widson looked at it and whistled.

"These Greeks don't keep their gear in shape, eh? Let's rig this pump and try her out a bit first—line, too."

They did it, being now resolved on working through the day, or at least until noon. In an hour's time they had rigged the pump and tested the gear, and Erdstrom was on the ladder ready to screw down his helmet. He had been down before now, he said, and was quite confident.

"Well, mind your signals!" said Widson. "I'll have to pump and haul both, and it'll be a man's job; but I'll not fail you. May be a bit slow getting you up, that's all. I guess we can manage it."

He was not so confident as he appeared, but the event would take care of itself, with luck. He wondered how Erdstrom would feel about going down—if he knew!

Very full preparations had been made by Erdstrom; he had neglected nothing, as though he had known absolutely he would find the wreck here. No doubt he had known it, indeed! He had a dynamite charge prepared, water-proofed fuse ready, and went down with it as though he were quite certain of the outcome.

Widson had a job to let him down at decent speed and still keep the pump clicking regularly, but somehow managed it. He breathed a sigh of relief when he got the signal that Erdstrom was grounded; now he had only to see that the line paid out clear, and to keep the pumps at work. He could not bother about keeping the lines taut; if Erdstrom allowed any slack, that was his own lookout.

Erdstrom was careful, however. That, reflected Widson, was the man's bane—every point covered, every detail provided for! Suddenly he started at a new thought. Could it be that Erdstrom had trailed Harden here? It was not like the man to go in for impulsive murder, and his knowledge of Harden had apparently been slight. Perhaps he had known Harden better than any one here supposed!

"I've hit the nail on the head," thought Widson, as he pumped mechanically, with one eye on the gauge and the other on the lines, the signal line passing over his arms. "Yes, sir, I've sure hit it! Well, no matter. The main thing—"

THE signal came unexpectedly, and swiftly, for Erdstrom had not been down ten minutes yet. Now Widson gave all his thought to the work in hand; fortunately the depth was so slight as to cause little trouble. He kept the pump-handles going with one hand and hauled in with the other, not trying to keep the lines shipshape. When at length Erdstrom got to the long ladder hooked across the gunnel, he managed to come up it himself, letting Widson pump. Then the helmet came off at last, and Erdstrom shook his head when Widson would have helped him in.

"No, I stay here—we are in luck, and one must push luck while it lasts," he said. "You light the fuse. Everything is fixed, ready! Do you understand? I had only to walk to it—the way smashed open for me! It is like magic, the way things are working out for us! Light it quickly!"

Widson shrugged and obeyed. The order

was madness, but Erdstrom, clinging there to the ladder in his diving suit, was mad with excitement; and consequences mattered nothing to Widson.

Five minutes later, the little craft heaved madly, as a huge bubble of water shot up beneath her and burst. Widson had fully expected to see Erdstrom shaken off, but the man's grip was good. The boat settled, and bits of wreckage came to the surface.

"Quick!" cried Erdstrom, his voice shrilling with impatience. "The helmet and the extra line and sling! We'll have it all done in half an hour or less. Nothing in sight?"

"Nothing," said Widson.

Another five minutes, and Erdstrom was on his way down again, Widson working with both hands at pumps and lines. By a miracle, he got them paid out without a kink.

The pumps clicked regularly, evenly for Widson knew how to handle them. What was going on below, he could not tell, and had no time to be gazing over the side. If Erdstrom fouled his air line, he was lost—but Widson knew he would not foul it. The man had prepared against everything to the very last detail.

"Everything," said Widson, "except the finger of a dying man and letters in the sand. He never dreamed any one would come along and take the part of a dead man, and fasten the murder on him! But it's not fastened yet."

He himself felt curiously aloof from the entire treasure business. It was unreal, almost fantastic, to find it in this manner. Unreal, too, that he should step into a partnership with Erdstrom; the latter could not have proceeded without assistance, but he might have had that without splitting the whole loot. Did he mean to split it? Widson strongly doubted this.

Then the signal, jerking his reflections back to the work in hand. Erdstrom came up very slowly and carefully; slight as the depth was, Widson took no chances of giving him the bends. The game could not be played that way!

Over the ladder and helmet off at last. Erdstrom helped rid himself of the suit before he spoke, then he looked at Widson and laughed.

"No questions? Have you no curiosity, no excitement?"

"Inside, not outside," said Widson. "Got it?"

"Yes. One pull and up it comes—all of it. Me, I am not cold and phlegmatic like you, my friend—where is that wine?"

"Push your luck before you celebrate," said Widson.

Erdstrom drew a deep breath and held his exuberant spirits in check. He was laughing, talking, jesting, all at once, and yet he held back from the line. When Widson went to it and gestured, Erdstrom came and joined him, almost reluctantly.

"It is hard to believe, and I have a feeling there is no luck in it," said Erdstrom as he took hold. "Contradict myself? Yes; now that I am certain, now that it is all over except to pull up this rope, I hesitate."

"Remorse, perhaps," said Widson. The other straightened up and stared at him oddly.

"Remorse! For what, then?"

Widson shrugged. "You're a man. Don't all men feel remorse at times—especially at times when they are about to seize upon sudden great wealth or benefit handed them by fate? We all feel that we don't deserve it, and we hesitate."

"Oh!" said Erdstrom. "Hm! Me, I am not a philosopher. Let us pull up, and then when we are ashore, break out that wine."

SO THEY fell to the line, hauling it in rapidly, and Widson saw his companion had made a shipshape job down below, because everything was clear and the weight came up readily. It grew as they looked down, and Widson perceived it to be a large box or chest.

Presently it was under them, and the weight of it told now, so that the craft tipped and lay gunnel to water; fortunately there was no sea. Widson examined the box and found it to be a chest, the line well fastened to the large handles at either end. The weight was considerable, and he suggested towing it in to shore, but Erdstrom protested vehemently.

"No! Get it aboard and take no more chances! We can lift it—"

"Get it to the stern, then—we can't lift it here amidships," said Widson.

Erdstrom had the strength of three men in him just then, and somehow they managed to get the chest aboard without sending the little craft over. Then Erdstrom went to pieces, momentarily, dropping like an exhausted dog above the dripping thing he had brought up from the deep. Widson said nothing, but got in their

anchor, started the engine, and sent the craft in by the channel to the other side of the islet, where they would be safe from observation.

Erdstrom was himself again when they reached camp, hauled up the nose of the craft, and trundled the chest ashore. He got out hatchet, chisel and jimmy, and went at the metal casket viciously, so that the clangor reverberated from the the yellow dunes and the blazing waters. It was nearly noon, but neither man thought of this or regarded it.

Although he wore himself out on that chest, Erdstrom smashed into it none the less, and with a deep breath of triumph, swung back the battered lid. Inside were little cloth sacks, dozens of them, neatly stored away. Water had got into the chest and had turned the papers and documents there into a sodden mass, and the little cloth sacks fell apart when touched; but falling, they revealed gold.

"British gold," said Erdstrom in a low voice, staring at the yellow coins. "Sovereigns! Hundreds of them, thousands of them! And all ours. Where's that wine?"

"Not yet," said Widson, and lighted a cigaret. "Going to take the thing back like this? Let those Italian chaps see it, and good night!"

"No, no! I have suitcases—the ones our provisions were in," exclaimed Erdstrom. "You are right—we must pack it all up at once and then sink the chest. If any one saw, we should be ruined after all! You are right, right!"

HE FELL to work again, and Widson joined him at the task. Presently they had three cheap wicker suitcases stuffed with gold—they almost fell apart, so heavy was the load—and laid aboard the boat. There remained a few dozen coins, which the two men shared, filling pockets and laughing. Then Widson got the two large bottles of champagne from the locker, and joined Erdstrom in the shade of their little tent.

"*Mon Dieu!* Are you not a little bit elated, excited, happy?" exclaimed Erdstrom as he watched Widson work at the wires of one cork. "Here you have become rich literally overnight; and you do not even snap your fingers!"

Widson smiled. "To some people, money isn't everything," he said. "This wine of yours will be devilish warm—better each of us take a bottle, eh?"

The corks exploded without much urging, and the two men drank. Erdstrom's nervous and intense nature reacted instantly; he had exhausted himself physically, and now he began to soar mentally. Widson knew the moment had arrived, and spoke negligently, lowering his bottle.

"How did Harden know about it?" he asked. "Too bad you had to kill him."

IV

HE RECEIVED an answer, but not the one he expected; gone at once was all his chance of accusing, of learning what had happened. For, like a flash, the heavy champagne bottle flew from Erdstrom's hand and the butt of it struck Widson over the left eye, barely missing the temple.

Knocked backward by the blow, Widson went sprawling under the tent. Erdstrom leaped to his feet, and a pistol whipped out in his hand; he fired pointblank, and the figure of Widson collapsed and went limp.

Erdstrom stood there in the sunlight, pistol in hand, helmet shoved back, and wiped the sweat from his eyes as he peered. A grin showed his white teeth, and he chuckled softly as he put up the weapon.

"So, you fool!" he observed. "And you thought I did not suspect, eh? You did not know that your words in the consulate were reported to me by the servants, eh? Well, your boasting is done, you swine—you and Harden were cut off the same pattern! And I remain, with the gold that is mine."

He picked up his bottle, but it had drained into the sand; he stooped for that of Widson, in which a little wine remained, and gurgled it down. Then he flung the bottle at the motionless shape inside the tent, laughed at sight of the thin trickle of red against the side of Widson's white shirt, and turned to the boat.

There he had work to do, despite the heat, for he dared take no chances. Widson's death was nothing; even if questions were asked before he could get away with his gold, he could make a statement and be done with it. But, if any Greek sponger or Italian fish-boat happened along, he could never explain this diving equipment. And he knew well enough they were all looking for him, because they would know about

his renting the equipment. If they found him here on the spot, he and his gold would be gone. If he got back to Tripoli by nightfall, his game would be won. But he must get back in good shape.

So he fell to work coiling up the lines again, replacing as though unused, making his craft shipshape. The suitcases he left out in the bow, merely flinging a tarpaulin across them. When he had finished the task, the full reaction seized him. He came staggering ashore under the weight of the blinding noontide heat, and made for the tent.

"Out of there, dead dog!" he exclaimed, seizing the ankle of Widson and pulling out the American's body. "Two hours—two hours and I'll get away—must sleep a bit—"

He fell unconscious—the last ounce of nervous force was drained. The sun had all but got him.

Barely an hour later, he came to himself, wakened, dragged out of the shelter and looked around; his face was darkened, his eyes were bloodshot, but the rest had refreshed him. He glanced at the body of Widson, face down, then walked to the boat and set himself at the bow, straining to shove her out. He accomplished it, and tumbled aboard. In the stern was balanced the iron chest, and as she floated a little out with the impetus of his shove, Erdstrom seized on this and toppled it overboard. Then he turned to the engine, and the hot quiet of the inlet was broken by the chattering sputter of the motor. Seated at the side wheel near the engine, Erdstrom turned her and sent her out along the channel, and in two minutes was gone around the spit of sand.

NO SOONER had the sound of his engine died, than Widson's body came alive. Sitting up, Widson emerged from the swarm of flies and then came to his feet. He staggered to the tent, retrieved his sun-helmet, and crawled into the shade. There he tore up his shirt and made shift to bandage a nasty bullet-scrape along his ribs with strips of the garment.

"I certainly put my foot into it that time!" he cogitated. "However, he'll be back—I can't lie around wasting time. Push your luck, as friend Erdstrom says!"

He went out, searched and found the side of a box which had contained provisions. With this and his own fountain pen, he retired again to the shelter of the tent.

Some little while later the puttering chug of the motor was heard, and presently the boat poked her nose around the end of the sand-spit hiding the channel. She came rapidly, at full speed; Erdstrom was standing at the tiller, bare-headed, his aspect frenzied, and from a livid countenance his eyes flamed wildly.

He shut off the engine too late, so that the craft went plunging at the sandy shore and ran her nose into it, flinging him off balance with the shock. He picked himself up and ran forward to where the suitcases had been covered with the tarpaulin; now only the tarpaulin remained, lying in a crumpled heap. Erdstrom looked at it, then leaped ashore and stood staring around. With a start, he perceived what was before him, and stood gaping.

There where the level sand had been, was now a heaped-up mound, and at the head of it a white flat board bearing letters. The man's eyes widened as he realized some one had been here. He glanced swiftly all about, saw nothing, and stepped closer to the mound, that was so like a grave. When he could read the letters on the board, he perceived it was indeed a grave, and he stood there blankly, eyes distended, staring, thunderstruck by the mystery of the thing. For he read on the headboard:

Here Lies
Hiram Widson
This Day
Murdered By
Erdstrom

A stifled cry broke from Erdstrom, and he whirled about, gripping at his pistol, his eyes probing the white stretch of sand with terror and horror in their gaze. He saw nothing, and checked himself.

"Gone!" he said thickly. "Gone—and yet I put it into the boat—and it's gone! And who has done this thing? Who buried him? Who took it?"

There was a laugh, dreadful upon the empty silence of the place, and a voice spoke.

"Harden. Murdered!"

No one was in sight. Erdstrom cursed, ran to the tent, tore it away, to show only sand. He glared around, his face suffused with blood, purpled. A sudden fierce, wild yell burst from him as he shook his pistol in the air.

"Answer me! Devil, swine, dog—where are you? Where is my gold? Who took it out of the boat?"

A soft, quiet chuckle came to his ears. He whirled again, saw no one—then looked up and his jaw fell. On the crest of the seaward hummock of sand behind him sat Widson, naked to the waist.

With a choking cry, Erdstrom broke into a mad, scrambling run toward the figure above. He rushed up the hill of loose sand, slipping, struggling along frantically, a storm of curses on his lips, frenzy in his eyes. When he was nearly to the top, Widson fell over backward out of sight.

Erdstrom gained the crest, panting heavily, and his jaw fell. There was no one in sight. With one fearful cry, he hurled himself forward, plunged down the declivity at a mad run, leaping in great bounds toward the shore below. He dropped his pistol, tore the shirt from about his throat, passed the bit of driftwood he had set for a marker, and went headlong into the blue waters. For a moment his head bobbed there, and then it went under—and did not come up.

"Poor devil! The sun—and conscience—maddened him," muttered Widson. He shook off the loose sand that had drowned him, as he sat on the dune, and for a space sat watching the waters below, but Erdstrom did not reappear.

Presently Widson sighed, rose, and turned toward the boat on the other side of the islet. When he came to the pseudo-grave, he kicked aside the sand and disclosed the three suitcases.

V

IT WAS midnight when Widson and three porters reached the consulate and knocked up the representative of the United States. The porters deposited a heavy suitcase each, received a ten-lire note each, and departed into the night. Widson went into the office with the consul, and thankfully threw off the tarpaulin which served him as shirt.

"Hello! Hurt?" exclaimed the consul, who was still sleepy.

"Nope, just barked," said Widson, gratefully accepting the bottle and siphon shoved at him, and pouring a stiff one. "Those three grips have the gold in them, by the way."

"The—*what?*" The consul opened his eyes at this. "Gold? Mean to say you've actually found the stuff? Are you spoofing me?"

"Nope. It's there," said Widson, and downed his drink. "I want you to take charge of it and put the thing through legally—I'm not out for this stolen money stuff, old sport. Savvy? What belongs to me, can come to me; my pants pockets are full anyhow, which is enough for the present. Harden and I share alike in it. Look up his heirs, if he has any. If he has none, his share can come to me. Suit you?"

The consul gulped. "My gosh, man! You've got it—just walk away with it!"

"Damned fine advice from a consular officer, huh?" Widson grinned wearily. "No, thanks. Can't be done in this case. You hew to the line, feller, and I'll take whatever chips fall my way."

"But where's Erdstrom?" The consul looked suddenly startled. "You didn't—"

"Erdstrom," said Hiram Widson thoughtfully, "got a touch of sun. I didn't touch him. Last I saw of him he was traveling eastward—trying to walk to Jerusalem. I fancy he's learned a few things by this time. Well, here's to Harden, whoever he was! Time for refreshment, old chap—"

His head fell forward, and he was smiling when the consul picked him up and called the servants to lug him off to bed.